

EMIL KNEBEL'S ACCOUNT OF MAKING OF "COME BACK, AFRICA"

In 1957, Mr. Israel Rogosin, accompanied by his son Lionel, visited Israel. His visit and his meetings with Ben Gurion, with the Minister of Commerce and Industry, with the top economists and industrialists of the State of Israel of those years, were reported daily by the local press and the radio. Naturally, when Lionel Rosin called me and asked for a meeting, I was very surprised. He was the son of the major American investor in Israeli industry at the time, a well known filmmaker, a celebrity that mingled with the elite of Israeli establishment while I was a local newsreel cameraman with few short films to my credit.

When we met, Lionel explained the reason for our meeting : he was looking for a team that would be willing to go with him for several months to South Africa. He told me that he had reviewed most of the films done in Israel (a very tiny industry in the mid-fifties, with a small output of mostly short films) and among them had seen the few shorts photographed by me. These had impressed him more than the other films he had seen due to their simple, honest photographic style. He told me about his new project in South Africa, which he described as a musical film but shot in a completely different way than the standard way Hollywood musical films used to be shot. On the positive side, his models were the films of Robert Flaherty some of which I was familiar with and Satyajit Ray's films, *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito*, which I had never seen. He wanted to make his musical film the way Flaherty shot his documentaries : no actors but real people, no studio but actual locations, no large crew but a minimal and highly professional one ; those were his preliminary thoughts about the production.

After several more meetings, and after he had offered me the job as cameraman, Lionel finally told me his true intention hidden behind the facade of a musical movie, namely he wanted to make a political film that would directly attack the system of apartheid and would expose its inhuman face to the world.

I was very young at the time and my sensitivities to any injustice and in particular to racial discrimination, were sharpened by my childhood experiences during WW2 and by a lot of Marxist literature. In those days, I believed very sincerely that any morally wrong policy had to be dealt with by an active intervention. Those sensitivities and somehow simplistic attitudes dictated many of my daily activities and were a part of my never pronounced naive wish to improve the state of world affairs via my film work. When meeting Lionel, I was amazed to realize that

affairs via my film work. When meeting Lionel, I was amazed to realize that although ten years older than I and coming from such a different background than mine, he nevertheless shared my feelings. Lionel found in me an enthusiastic partner for his project and a member of the crew he was forming for the making of his film. It became obvious to me how different Lionel was from the image I had had of him, considering his father's business circles.

Later on, over the years, I was to learn that the Rogosins father-son relations were as banal as father-son relations usually are within rich Jewish families. Nevertheless they were much more complicated than my first simplistic impression. Israel Rogozin, still entertained the idea that the financial fiasco "*On the Bowery*" would convince Lionel to return to his senses and join his father in his successful industrial enterprise. Lionel admired his old man but at the same time, wished to be different. More politically aware and sensitive to social problems, Lionel wanted to be an artist rather than a businessman. His artistic inclination, in his opinion, had been inherited from his sensitive German-born mother, who had chosen to live her life as the wife of a very stubborn, strong, ruthless but very courageous and successful Jew. It has always been my impression that what Lionel most wanted, as long as his father was alive and even after that, was to prove to the old man and to himself that he could be as successful as his father, but in the field of political and social filmmaking rather than in the rayon industry.

Lionel often read and reread during the CBA days the letters of Vincent Van Gogh to his brother Theo. The book was constantly at his bedside. I doubt whether Lionel, an American and a New Yorker, ever realized that for the Dutch painter the word "success" must have had a very different significance than it had for a New Yorker!

During my meetings with Lionel in Tel-Aviv, he mentioned Walter Wettler, a soundman from Switzerland. Wettler was a specialist in recording classical music with little previous experience in filmmaking but in Lionel's opinion he would be the perfect man for the job. He mentioned as an alternative, Ernst Artaria, a Swiss cameraman strongly recommended by Wettler, but was reluctant to take his advice if he could

find a suitable alternative cameraperson in Israel. I set up several meetings for Lionel with the majority of active Israeli cameramen at the time. After a few meetings with some of them, Lionel decided on Artaria, relying mostly on Wettler's strong recommendation.

Lionel left for SA to complete the script, to cast the participants who would act in the film and to finalize all the logistic problems. We planned to meet in Johannesburg after a couple of months.

In the meantime Lionel also needed to receive an approval from the South African authorities for the project as well as work permits for the crew. Later on, I learned that a member of the SA Parliament in Pretoria, an owner of a local film laboratory in Johannesburg, who was keen to receive a client with a lot of film stock to be processed, had been very instrumental on this issue.

Upon my arrival to Johannesburg, Lionel brought me from the airport to the apartment that the members of the crew, Wettler, Artaria and I, were to share during the production months ahead. The apartment was in a large rental building located in a residential area of Johannesburg. The building was run by an old and sick Jewish landlady who, without ever leaving her bed, dealt very efficiently with managing the place via an army of black servants, --"Boys" in her vocabulary; a term that applied to male and female servants alike as long as the servants were blacks. Lionel and Eleanor (his wife), who was pregnant at the time, had an apartment on the same floor as ours but at the other end of the corridor. The landlady supplied us with a "boy" who would prepare our very early morning breakfasts and a white professional cook to prepare our dinners, which were served after work in the living room of Lionel and Eleanor's apartment.

A day or two after we had settled in the apartment, Lionel called for the first production meeting. He read us the outline of the script and after the reading was completed, to my big surprise, I was the only one who asked when we would start the shooting. The others were very reserved, to say the least. Reserved, not due to the content or the form of the script, which as far as I remember, were not discussed at all, but due to the production challenge that the film presented. Both Artaria and Wettler were of the opinion that in order to shoot a script like this, which called for a full feature production, the present crew, in addition to us, had to include at least another 5-6 professionals such as a lighting man, a grip,

a boom man, two assistants for the two cameramen, a script girl etc. Without such a crew, the project, in their professional opinion, could not take off. I was the youngest and probably the least experienced among them in feature productions. But I was far more experienced in documentary work than they both were. That is why I was convinced the job could be done provided the four of us were willing to take upon ourselves more functions than is traditionally customary. Besides, I was of the opinion that we should immediately train some local people to help us as much as possible. To make things worse, without having any previous experience with the local people, but a strong feeling for the oppressed, I was convinced their training could give excellent results. It made Artaria very upset. He was convinced we were amateurishly wasting time and money. According to his European standards, two years were usually needed to train a white assistant cameraman. To train a black one it would probably take more. Wettler was more flexible and was willing to try and see what would happen.

In order to prove and to convince Artaria and Wettler that things could be done even with our existing small crew, Lionel decided to change the planned schedule of shooting. The production-wise simplest scenes, he decided, would be shot first and only later on would we move to the more complicated scenes that required sync sound and lighting.

Lionel's tactical move proved to be right. Within a short time Wettler began to like the new experience of shooting a feature with a small crew. Without enlarging the crew, slowly and smoothly we moved to do the more complicated scenes. Wettler, besides being a perfect soundman who could hide his microphones in all kind of unimaginable places and always succeeded to produce an amazingly clearly recorded sound, also filled a variety of functions. He was a driver and, on many occasions, acted as production manager and a planner of our daily work but, above all, as our continuity person (script girl). Wettler, because of the nature of his work as a soundman was normally positioned, during the shoot, further off from the scene than Lionel, Artaria or I. In spite of it, in cases when a reshoot of a scene or some additional shots for a long-ago completed scene were required, he remembered and knew, better than any one of us, the fine details of the set and of the *mise-en-scène*. From the recorded sound and his carefully kept notes, Wettler could recreate the visual look of a scene weeks after it had been shot. His creative professionalism and systematic way of thinking, even under some very pressing moments, were a blessing for the production.

Artaria's difficulties with our unorthodox way of working lasted almost to the last day of shooting. He was convinced that nothing presentable would ever come out of the film, but in spite of his consistent skepticism he worked very conscientiously and hard. It was his aim and a professional ambition to keep our "amateur", in his terminology, attitude as much as possible in check.

From the first day of shooting till the last, Ernie, as we used to call him, was in full control of the lab in order to ensure the even standard of developing our negatives during the production. On the indoor or night shootings, which required lighting, he always had with him a container with a fresh developer and fixer taken in advance from the lab. Before shooting a scene he insisted to develop a test strip of film by himself in order to see the effects of the lighting created for a scene on the actual emulsion of the negative. He would do the processing on the spot, in a darkest corner of the set, and would never allow the scene to be shot before the test was completed and approved by him. Ernie always tried to shoot from a tripod even under the most unfavorable circumstances for that kind of shooting and never used a hand-held camera. For him a handheld shot was painfully improper for a feature film.

The living room of our apartment was turned into a 35 mm mute screening room for the rushes that were supplied to us by the local lab every evening. They were screened after dinner and shipped immediately for security reasons together with the negative and sound that same night, to NYC. There, in an editing room located on one of the floors of 1600 Broadway, Carl Lerner, the film editor, and his black assistant, Hue, were working on synchronizing the visual footage with the sound, logging it and assembling the shots to the first rough cut of the film. Carl would communicate with us via telegrams. Often in these telegrams he would request a reshooting of certain shots or ask us to shoot additional shots in order to enhance and enrich the rough cut or to clear out some technical continuity problems of that or another sequence.

Sophiatown, an old black neighborhood just next to Johannesburg, was the place to which our two production station wagons were heading each morning. The neighborhood was half ruined; people had been moved out from there to the newly constructed black townships located further from town. These new places were built according to a plan which provided the police with easy control over the area as against the narrow and

irregularly created streets of Sophiatown which were all but unfit for that purpose. Here, in a run-down mission school, were the main locations for our indoors shooting. It became our studio. The actual locations were much too small for shooting. But the sets were constructed according to the layout of the actual places and even furnished and decorated with probes from the true locations.

The sequence of the shebeen (“speak easy”) discussion, the living room of Zacharia and Vinah, living quarters of Zacharia at the mine compound, the indoors of the last sequence of the film and many other scenes were all shot in the classrooms of that mission school. Most of the day and night shootings were done on the streets of Sophiatown.. During the daytime or surely at night, no whites would dare to visit this neighborhood. The blacks had full control of every day life over there. Our crew was always welcomed and respected in Sophiatown. All the participants of ceremonies such as weddings or street marches, square dances or weekend corner music playing youngsters, all of them loved to be filmed. Somehow the people of Sophiatown knew or felt our friendly attitude to their predicament. Possibly someone from the, at the time, illegal African Congress dropped a word in our favor.

During the entire period of shooting that lasted several months I don't recall any incidents in which black Africans would interrupt our work or would create an uneasy situation for us, except in one case in which Lionel was in serious danger. While shooting one of the marching crowd scenes, I was shooting from the roof of the near-by buildings while Lionel was down on the street watching from the shortest possible distance, in a close-up, one may say, of the faces of the passing crowd. People's faces always fascinated him. Some of the people in the crowd noticed the camera and me above on the roof, pointed this out to the others and the passing crowd started to stare directly at the camera. In order to prevent it and to distract people's attention from the camera, Lionel started to offer coins to the mass of people passing below the shooting lens provided they would not look up. Within seconds, Lionel found himself surrounded by hundreds of people demanding their share. George, our thin, tiny and street-smart local driver, succeeded somehow to pull Lionel out from the crowd and to bring him to safety in one of our station wagons.

Lionel had hired George for the job as driver after screening several

other candidates. Most of them were much bigger and stronger fellows than George. What impressed Lionel about George was that during the interview George asked to be permitted on his days off to walk, "footing up" as he called these walks, to his native village in order to be cured by his native village witch doctor from the illnesses that black people usually get from too close an association with whites. Lionel loved that story. He liked George's openness and honest talk although very often he was strongly irritated by his inefficiency and easy-going attitude about things that were of mighty importance for us and completely negligible for George. For example: the suitcase. All the "actors" wardrobe of the film was packed in one large and very old suitcase that was always with us in one of the station wagons, preferably the one where Lionel was seated. Lionel, among all his numerous worries and problems, steadily worried whether the suitcase was in a safe place. Had that suitcase or part of its contents disappeared, it would have posed a terrible problem, costume-wise, with the continuity of the film. The hat with a hole in it and the rest of Zacharia's outfit were irreplaceable. We had no double sets for any of them. Lionel insisted we all watch that suitcase very carefully and never leave it in the unguarded car. For George it was just an old suitcase filled with junk and he could not understand the fuss created around it. Problems of film continuity with respect to wardrobe were absolutely none of George's concerns. Sometimes he would walk freely out of the car leaving the backdoor of the station wagon wide open relying on his feelings that no one, even in the most forbidding neighborhoods of Johannesburg, would ever be tempted to steal such an old suitcase filled with junk.

Lionel could look and read the faces of people like an open book. In that way he had cast all the black participants of the film who had never dreamed or wanted to be actors, except of course, Miriam Makeba who was a well-known singer in Johannesburg. Zacharia was picked up by Lionel from a crowd of people passing by; so was Vinah, Eddy, Marumu and others. Lionel never needed to shoot an actor test. He never seemed to need advice in matters of casting. He relied totally on his own judgments. For him the right facial expression of a person and his/her body language were the most important factors. Lionel's problem was in casting the whites. Here, his selection possibilities were much more limited; he had to choose among those who were known as an anti-apartheid crowd of people, and who were willing to free their time for a film that fought the right cause. To act in this film, for all of them, was a part of their political activity.

Lionel was well aware that their “acting” was far below what he wished, but he had to compromise and it was eating his heart. In vain, naively, he hoped that the serious critics and the viewers of the film would understand this difficulty but never, as far as I know, did he publicly ask for understanding and, one may say, he proudly refused to ask for mercy.

Lionel prepared each scene very carefully, rehearsing with the “actors” on the set, changing the dialog, allowing the actors to improvise both the dialog and their movements. That obviously created a problem for setting the lights, mikes and camera angles, but when everything was finally ready for shooting the scene, Lionel would mysteriously disappear from the set. We had to look for him in his various hiding places and to ask him to come on the set. I assume Lionel had some sort of a deep-seated fear to finalize the scene on an emulsion. It seldom happened while shooting the true documentary scenes but it repeatedly happened on more complicated scenes where a dialog and acting were involved. Neither I, nor any one else ever discussed those disappearances with Lionel. It was taboo.

It seems to me today, that Lionel mostly loved the true-life action scenes and did not feel completely at home with the staged ones. That is why, in my opinion, the scene of the discussion at shabeen with Miriam singing at the end of it, saw Lionel at his best. He had gathered the right group of people. He explained the scene to them and its context within the film, and provoked a discussion. No written dialog was prepared and handed to them. At the right moment of the discussion he brought Miriam into the scene. After everything was ready for the scene, and just before shooting, Lionel instructed us, his camera people, to load as many camera magazines as possible with film stock and to be ready to cover the scene, to the best of our abilities, whatever would happen. As far as I remember there was not one single rehearsal for that scene. We had two heavy Arriflex blimp cameras and we were changing angles and the sizes of the shooting lenses as the discussion was going on. Once the scene had been completed I shot several traditional intercuts: shots of hands lighting a cigarette, hand moving a glass etc. for editing purposes. Lionel was laughing at me. The scene was perfect as it was, and no “cut outs” were necessary in his opinion; he was so sure about it even before seeing the rushes.

One of the more difficult scenes to shoot was the mine sequence. The mine authorities were extremely reluctant to grant us a permit to shoot even in the compound surrounding the mine on the ground level. To go down underground to the pit was completely out of the question. It was a policy that could be over-ruled only by a direct order from a government office in Pretoria. I remember Eleanor and Lionel were working on it for weeks, until finally they succeeded to gain, as far as I remember, a one-day only permit to shoot in the mine itself and a two- or three-day permit to shoot in the compound around it.

Ernie could not join us in the mine itself due to a claustrophobic fear he suffered since his early childhood in any underground places. So he had to stay in the compound above the ground and the effective shots of the columns of miners walking toward the mine at early morning darkness before the sun rise, when only the lights of their miner headgear were visible, are to his credit.

Zacharia once dressed in a miner outfit looked completely like one of the hundreds of black miners lining up for the elevators. He refused to be taken down to the pit by the elevators labeled "blacks only". Zacharia was scared to death that once down there, in the lower floor of the pit, he would either lose us or we might lose touch with him and he would be regarded by the white bosses of the floor, as one of the black miner boys and treated as such. Among many other things, he might be unable to leave the mine compound for several months or years; he would be imprisoned there until the contract of the present batch of miners "boys" expired. I never saw Zacharia so fearful as on that day. For his safety he insisted on going down together with us in an elevator with a sign "for whites only" but it was impossible. Lionel offered to go with him in the elevator for blacks but in the system of strict apartheid held by the mine authorities that was impossible as well.

I don't recall how the problem was resolved because I went down first to prepare the shooting on the mine floor. I just remember that I had to wait for Lionel and Zacharia many hours alone among the miners down in the pit where the temperature was extremely high. While waiting I set the lights and shot the activities around me. To my regret I was limited by the 200 feet of film I had with me. The rest of the film stock was with Lionel and Zacharia "upstairs". When they finally succeeded in joining me, after a short while there was some sort of an alarm in the mine, and

we had to leave the place as soon as possible. Most of the 200 feet exposed by me, before their arrival, was included in the final print of the film.

Of great help to Lionel, during his entire stay in SA, were Mertyl and Monty Berman. Both of them were activists in a variety of organizations of the anti-apartheid movement. Mertyl was active in the Union of African Artists and the majority of the white cast for the film came from her circle of friends. The Berman's house was a meeting place of many black and white local bohemians. We all attended several parties, organized by them where alcoholic drinks were served almost openly to black guests in spite of the very strict law forbidding it. Often during a party, we would be warned that the police is near-by and the drinks had to be moved out of sight. The wrap-up party of the film was organized in this house and naturally all the participants of the film were there. It was a great event for all of us but spoiled for me at a certain point by Lionel's decision to settle some unfinished, emotionally loaded, personal problem with Morris. Morris was neither a black nor a white person, he was racially mixed and never had known his biological parents; people around him usually did not like him very much. He was working for us as a sort of production manager and performed his functions sometimes well and sometimes badly. Lionel did not like him very much either, but definitely never showed his feelings toward him openly. During the party Lionel had had many drinks and at certain moment asked Morris to go outside with him to the backyard of the house. There, he started a completely unexpected and most cruel fistfight with Morris whose face began to bleed profusely. To separate the two, for me alone, was impossible so I had to call one or two people from the party and somehow we succeeded to separate them.. Lionel returned to the party as if nothing had happened. Morris left. I was in a state of complete shock. Until this day I cannot understand this unexpected, cruel and unjust behavior of Lionel. After all, Morris had worked with us for many months and to the best of my knowledge had never done anything that could in any way explain, let alone, justify the amount of hatred that Lionel accumulated against him. If Morris had done something particularly outrageous, I would certainly have known about it.

A day or so after the party, Artaria, Wettler, Lionel and Eleanor with their new-born son, Michael (I am his godfather), left South Africa and I stayed there all by myself. I was supposed to shoot some more mute

shots on the streets of Johannesburg. Besides, I was to hear from Lionel and Carl whether they needed some additional new shots to be done after they had viewed together the rough-cut of the film in NYC. One such request which arrived via telegram was for a shot that would justify, at the beginning of the film, all the marching crowd scenes. The audience would thus be informed visually from where the people were coming. With my Arri IIC fully loaded camera always ready, together with George, I scouted for a proper location for such a shot. On George's advice I climbed on a run-down, half-destroyed bridge overlooking a railway station. Through the viewfinder of the camera I checked the possible shot. The shot looked perfect but the station's platform and the two parallel railway tracks were completely deserted. Suddenly, from behind me, I heard an approaching train. I started the camera running and one train followed by another rolled in to my preset frame. The doors of the compartments were opened before the trains came to a full stop. A sea of black people disembarked in split of a second from the two fully loaded trains, and filled the empty platform of the station. I knew I had the right shot.

A few days later I got a telegram from Lionel and Carl congratulating me for what they called the best shot for their purpose.

I was preparing to leave SA, when the chief of the special branch of secret police came again to my place. From the time Lionel and the others had left this was his third or fourth visit. The first time he wanted to know why I had stayed behind when all the others had left. My reply, that I was disposing of all the equipment left after the production, seemed to satisfy him. The apartment crowded with all sorts of equipment supported visually that reply. During other visits he questioned me about our close association with the Bermans, and some black friends. Instinctively I would give him some answers-- obviously already known by him-- and would refer him to Lionel for details. On his last visit he wanted to know whether I was disposing of the equipment from the top of Johannesburg railway bridges. Contrary to their image, some secret police agents have a sense of humor. He asked for my passport and he promised to return it to me at the airport just before my departure for which he set the exact date and hour. On the scheduled time two secret police agents took me to the El Al plane heading for Tel Aviv.

Much was written at the time about the film being shot secretly in SA. There is no doubt that it was good for the publicity of the film and for the

feelings of all involved in its production. Today, it seems to me that the special branch of the police in SA at that time, must have known for quite a long time about the kind of film we were making. The anti-apartheid activists surrounded us most of the time and too many people were involved in the production to keep its contents secret. So the authorities must have known the political tendency of the film. We were not stopped, it seems to me, because it would have created an international scandal. We were an international crew. Whatever we did, we did legally. The Special Branch people must have known that Lionel came from an extremely rich family, and they could assume that the best lawyers from NYC would be hired in case of a need to protect our case in a court of law. So they had to choose between two inconveniences, either an immediate scandal or a later one when, and if, the film would open. As any other bureaucratic organization would do, they must have chosen the later inconvenience. The files and archives of the special branch of police in Johannesburg should be checked in order to verify whether my version is correct or not.

A few weeks after my departure from Johannesburg to Tel Aviv, at Lionel's invitation, I came to New York to assist in completing the film. At that time Carl, Hue and Lucy were working on the sound track. The picture was already locked, except for the very ending of the film. Neither Lionel nor Carl knew how to end it. The long debates about its ending lasted for many days and led nowhere. One day, Carl and Hue locked themselves in the editing room, asked not to be interrupted by anyone, and promised by the end of the day to come up with a solution. Indeed, later that afternoon, Lionel and I watched on a small screen of the mute, but noise-like hell, Carl's editing moviola of the edited suggestion for the film's end. Carl and Hue were completely exhausted, but confident of their suggestion, they were watching our reaction. The ending was simple, emotionally moving; it summed up the entire film. It was just right. All Lionel had to do was to thank them for the best possible picture ending of the movie. The sound track was added later on and during the trial screenings, audiences enthusiastically applauded that ending of the film.

A few years ago, people from MOMA organized a special evening for Lionel, who had donated the original negatives of "*On the Bowery*" and "*Come Back Africa*" to the film archives of that museum. Very few people were present. It was the last time I saw Lionel. He called me later

on, several times from LA, mainly during the Oslo agreements. He wanted to come to Israel. Aware that he had no longer any financial means to make a film about the Israel-Palestine conflict, he wanted to be active personally in the peace process.

In a documentary film, about the Japanese film director Yasujiro Ozu, "*Tokio Ga*" by Wim Windersthe, the veteran cameraman of most of Ozu's films, Yushun Atsuta, states that after Ozu died he had to retire because he could not work with any other director. My participation in the production of CBA was at the beginning of my film career. Since then, I have worked on many different films as a cameraman and a director, but none of the film work I have done has been as fulfilling, engaging and satisfying as the production of "*Come Back Africa*".